

A True Story

by

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Propositioning Sir Ian McKellen / 1.

Propositioning Sir Ian McKellen

4th of March, 2002: A beautiful day.

Randomly walked past the now demolished Canon Theatre in Beverly Hills, so named for being on Canon Drive adjacent Rodeo. Saw a notice about Sir Ian McKellen giving a Back Stage West talk that evening. *A Knight to Remember* they called it. 7:30 PM sharp.

I'd never met or known McKellen to this point, but I'd learned long before how to triangulate people's behavior in Hollywood. Not exactly quantum foam stuff, but accurate.

As such, McKellen was and is a person I hold in stellar regard, both as actor and Homo sapiens. A fine writer, too. You probably know him best as silver screen characters Magneto and Gandalf. Or my personal fave, James Whale in GODS AND MONSTERS.

McKellen has spent his life as an unafraid gay man, long successful in England's theatre and more. His ensemble of close friends reads like diamond history.

On top of my deep respect for his world, McKellen was also, at the time, specifically the actor I wanted for the lead in a somewhat daring for the era project I'd written, called CANDLE.

Maybe I'd catch him after the Canon Theatre talk and try it on.

So...I killed time at a local pizza place and did a couple laps around North Rexford and South Santa Monica Boulevard. Got back to the theatre an full hour before McKellen's talk, since admission was first come first served, limited to 360 people.

The line was huge. Not 360, but easily more than 200 ahead of me.

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My original plan was now dust, since I'd wanted to take a seat in the very front row. I had a really loud shirt on—stupid loud, in fact—and was hoping it would help get Sir Ian's attention throughout his talk.

Hey, you can dream, right? But if I could get myself visually registered in McKellen's head, far easier to try and discuss the aforementioned CANDLE project with him, when the talk concluded.

Familiarity in a storm, you know.

But, front row was gone. Damn. Worse yet the theatre was near to standing room only (SRO): not only would I *not* be in front, but I'd do well to find a seat at all.

Just then I saw a few open spots on the front right row. The hell? Had a group magically gotten up just now? I skipped down and asked the people sitting opposite if the seats were available. They were. Wow. I took one, not really understanding how it even worked out.

The man who would interview McKellen took the stage (Rob Kendt, Editor-in-Chief of Back Stage West) carrying two chairs. He put one chair alone and had a seat in the other.

As the theatre maxed-out and doors were closed, I wound up with the final seat next to me empty. Odd, but no complaint.

Minutes later Sir Ian emerged and was introduced. Purple tie and all. Crowd went crazy. McKellen was overwhelmed by the response, and very thankful. He calmed the cheers and sat beside Kendt.

And there it began.

Quick aside: It's such a disappointment when you find that an artist/performer you greatly respect is, in real life, completely low-rent. Trust me, it happens. In certain cases it's better not to know anything more about the people you admire than what you can see on the screen or stage.

Propositioning Sir Ian McKellen / 3.

In McKellen's case, I quickly saw he was just as many had previously told me: a great chap, indeed. Not only was I leveled by his emerging candor, benevolence, humor, but his manner was wildly counter to his known cinema presence: he was funny, mischievous, oversexed.

Silly, too. You'd never guess he was the storied Shakespearean titan from Burnley, Lancashire...save for his legendary articulation.

Furthermore—and as I'm sure you're aware—McKellen was then and now totally transparent about his homosexuality. Being gay was the first thing he mentioned that night, upon having some initial "political" confusion about which side of Kendt he should sit on, left or right...

It was during this confusion that I noted Sir Ian's unusually radiant eyes. They were steely-blue, almost too beautiful to behold for too long a time. No doubt they'd helped eased a few things to fruition in his life.

As blue eyes do...

And I spent quite a bit of the Canon talk looking *into* the eyes, because he directly spoke to me for long periods while relating his tales to the audience. No bullshit.

Yes, at first I thought I was imagining things, or that he was simply anchoring to my seat ("playing to" as it's called). But given my totally awkward compass position in the theatre it was clear he was somewhat fixated...to the point that people sitting near turned to look my way a few times. Hm.

Anyhow, McKellen talked at length of his early days in North England theatre, his schooling, his inspirations, being openly gay in an industry and world that was still semi-squeamish about it all (remember, it was 2002). Lovely stuff to hear, and all of it tempered with good-natured authority.

On and on it went. So enjoyable.

During the subsequent Q&A segment, Sir Ian was asked about the scene in the first LORD OF THE RINGS movie where Gandalf falls backward into the chasm, seemingly gone forever. A drama student in the audience found McKellen's performance hugely authentic and wondered if there were some trick or technique Ian had used to "get into" the moment.

McKellen emotionally told the young actor he'd simply imagined looking up at his boyfriend, and that dying would mean never seeing him again. Compelling.

Sir Ian then did a 360° and told the actor about the mechanics of shooting the chasm bit, that he was in truth staring at a tennis ball on a broomstick the whole time. The stick kept falling over during takes at which point McKellen screamed to the Canon audience, "You shall not *bounce!!*"

What a show.

However, the true pièce de résistance appeared at the end of the Q&A: McKellen stood from his chair and said, "Now you're going to get a little treat." He was about to run a scene he'd personally written to annex a Shakespearean play. *Macbeth?* Can't remember.

Whatever it was, McKellen instantly transformed from the playful individual he'd been for more than an hour and into the formidable seasoned actor he most certainly is.

Yes, we all watched in awe as Sir Ian McKellen came to the apron of the stage and launched a monologue that was one of the most powerful live performances I'd ever seen. And I've seen many. He was possessed. Another being.

Some people are great at their art, only in theory. McKellen, however, is a monument to the craft. If anyone came to this Canon gig unconvinced of that, his monologue surely converted them.

And then, he finished. Wow. I was a little stunned. Took me a minute to grab hold. I was ready to ask about CANDLE, though, as I was sure even more Q&A would follow right away.

Not true: After the monologue, McKellen simply gave a quick goodbye and was immediately spirited off by theatre personnel...

...but not before he looked directly back my way, expressionless. And that was that, right? No.

I tried to follow him backstage. No success. Hm. At this point I either heard someone say McKellen was headed for the loading dock, or I figured he'd wind up there.

I left the theatre and circled to the alley off North Canon. Sure enough, Sir Ian was surrounded at theatre back door, his idling black limo parked about 50' (15.2m) away at an angle to the crowd, driver waiting.

Damn. I was too far buried in bodies to have a chance for anything more than a wave, but I gave it a go anyway.

Into the mass I went, pushing gently through as McKellen signed LORD OF THE RINGS posters and books and magazines and whatnot. He was as kind and humble about it as you could possibly imagine. Innocent soul in a maelstrom. Totally composed and cordial.

Sweet man.

But I'd never make his position in time to chat about CANDLE. Even if I could, how do you talk shop in the middle of *this?* I watched on as he busily and politely signed item after item.

And then he saw me, literally pausing pen in hand when he did. Suddenly revived, I made more of an effort. Onward, right?

McKellen now occasionally looked up from his signing duties, noticeably keeping check of my position. This was neither illusion nor delusion. It was real. I still found it hard to believe in the moment. Or even now.

Propositioning Sir Ian McKellen / 6.

Indeed, McKellen definitely anticipated my arrival. Unless you can otherwise explain why he

repeatedly scanned the crowd til he found my eyes, and then went back to work. Hah!

Fun stuff, but all for nothing: there was simply no way I'd get to him through all the flesh.

And then I got a foolish idea:

Previous to the McKellen encounter—and long before cellular tech became what it is—I was in a

situation (with Jeremy Renner, in fact) where I had no way to write anything down. I lived to regret

it, and vowed it would never happen again.

So in my wallet I'd placed a broken pencil. Shoddy, but it was good enough to scribble a quick

address or something.

I pulled one of my business cards, which had only my name and phone on one side. On the

unprinted side, and in letters large and dark as possible, I wrote this:

DRINK?

Figured I'd just flash the handwritten DRINK? at McKellen from deep in the mire, and hope for the

best. Hey, why not?

But wait! Like branches parting, there was a sudden lessening of the crowd. Kinda strange, actually.

Red Sea, anyone? Security noticed too and they immediately urged McKellen toward his limo.

At that very moment the person in front of me unexpectedly stepped away, and just like that...

There we were: Sir Ian and I, face to face.

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McKellen studied me with an uncertain, energetic, nervous smile, his spectacular sapphire eyes

killing it with power and majesty. You could easily imagine him wearing a crown. Hah! Platinum, of

course, and canted one side.

McKellen seemed about to say something, but hesitated. What happened next was... Well, to this

day I'm not sure why I did the following, but perhaps it was all for the best:

Instead of shaking hands or quickly pitching the CANDLE project; instead of commenting on his

purple tie or saying/doing anything, I simply held the business card directly in front of me, showing

him the single large-block word on the back:

DRINK?

He started to reach for the card, but stopped to read what I'd written. When the word DRINK?

registered in his mind, he burst into a fit of giggles.

It's true: Sir Ian McKellen, lofty Shakespearean magnate of the boards, Gandalf and a thousand

other knightly names, giggling like a little girl over my single word "proposition".

McKellen reached and took the card, turned it over, then pocketed the thing without taking his eyes

away. At that point security guys moved him to his limo, but not before he looked back to me a final

time, smiling.

Security tucked McKellen into his car. Door closed and the blacked-out vehicle lurched off and

around to the quiet of Beverly Hills. I watched it disappear, and I've neither seen nor heard from

McKellen since. I did, however, receive several "hang-ups" over the next few months, from an

unidentified number.

I'd never gotten those before.

End.